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Questions About Plane's Origins Grow

Hill Units Probe Nicaragua's Charge of U.S. Connection

5 → By Joanne Omang
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New questions and conflicting information yesterday increased the uncertainty over the origins and sponsorship of a cargo plane loaded with weapons that was shot down in Nicaragua, as two congressional probes began focusing on possible U.S. links to the plane.

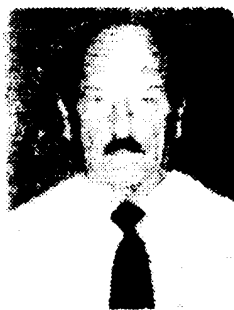
The top military commander of the Nicaraguan rebel force known as contras said the flight had been bringing in supplies for his troops in southern Nicaragua, but echoed Reagan administration officials in saying that the U.S. government had "nothing to do" with the event. [Details, Page A29.]

The State Department complained that Nicaragua's leftist Sandinista government had refused to receive consular representatives trying to see Eugene Hasenfus, 45, a U.S. citizen and the sole survivor of the crash. State Department spokesman Charles E. Redman said the incident "raises the question of whether a U.S. embassy can function normally in Nicaragua."

Yesterday evening, Nicaragua's U.N. ambassador, Nora Astorga, said on PBS' "MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour" that U.S. Embassy officials would be allowed to visit Hasenfus in the next day or two.

Intelligence officials told members of Congress in a closed briefing that two Americans killed in the crash, pilot William J. Cooper and copilot Wallace Blaine Sawyer Jr., 41, of Magnolia, Ark., had worked for the Central Intelligence Agency "years ago" but were no longer on the payroll, according to congressional sources. A third person killed in the crash was identified only as a Latin American.

The sources said that members of Congress were told that Hasenfus was not a former CIA employee. But in Marinette, Wis., an old friend of Hasenfus recalled that he "was



THIS WILL IDENTIFY

WILLIAM J. COOPER

CAPTAIN

8562

SOUTHERN AIR TRANSPORT

Nicaragua says identity card of pilot William Cooper was found at crash site.

always talking about what he'd done when he worked for them" 20 years ago, Washington Post correspondent Kevin Klose reported.

Hasenfus' cousin, Jack, said Sally Hasenfus, the wife of the captured American, flew to Miami yesterday to meet State Department officials. He said he understood that the department was trying to arrange a reunion between Hasenfus and his wife.

The congressional sources quoted the intelligence officials as saying the airplane had flown into Nicaragua from Ilopango Air Base in El Salvador, a tightly guarded Salvadoran military facility. But the intelligence officials told members of Congress they had not yet sorted out the sponsor or sponsors of the operation, according to those who heard the briefing.

Although the House panel spans the political spectrum, "nobody got excited about the mission," according to one source. "We all know this has been going on for years. This time they just got caught."

Another source at the meeting said the incident is not likely to affect Congress' attitude toward the contras or toward the \$100 million in aid awaiting final approval. Those who support the aid think that earlier approval would have allowed professionals to take over the contras' effort to overthrow the Sandinistas and saved these three lives, the source said.

The day's developments cast new doubt on the kind of plane involved in the crash. The Nicaraguan government has identified it as a U.S.-built C123 Provider, a big military transport used extensively in the Vietnam war, but Defense Department spokesmen said televised pictures from the crash site appeared to show a Canadian-built C7 transport, which has short takeoff and landing capability.

In Miami, William Kress, a spokesman for Southern Air Transport Co., who had previously denied all knowledge of the flight, said a search of company records had found that Cooper was issued a Southern Air identity card last April to allow him access to company grounds to do repair work on the plane that crashed. "We did maintenance on the aircraft that crashed," he said, and identified it as a C123, adding that it was not owned by Southern Air.

Kress also said that Sawyer had once worked for the company but left last year.

FBI officials said yesterday that two of their agents visited Southern Air offices as part of a probe into possible violations of the U.S. Neutrality Act, which prohibits Americans from engaging in hostile acts against countries not at war with the United States.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Richard G. Lugar (R-Ind.) said his committee will investigate the crash. And Sen. David F. Durenberger (R-Minn.), chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence, said "there will be many investigations" into the incident.

The was confusion over the plane's registration number and the history of the crew members.

Initial Nicaraguan government reports gave the registration number as C-824, which appears to be a military classification type used by the Salvadoran armed forces. Salvadoran government spokesmen refused to comment on the numbers or on similar numbers that the Nicaraguans said Hasenfus had given them for other planes allegedly parked at Ilopango.

A registration number published in Sandinista newspapers yesterday, N-44-10F, was traced by the Federal Aviation Administration as

belonging as of Aug. 2 to a C123K owned by Doan Helicopters Inc. of Daytona Beach, Fla. No one at Doan returned calls.

In Magnolia, Ark., Sawyer's father, Wallace Blaine Sawyer Sr., told Washington Post special correspondent T. James Munoz that his son was graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1968 and had served six years in the Air Force as a cargo plane pilot, part of the time in Vietnam. Afterward he flew contract missions in Thailand, Sawyer said, and has been a contract pilot "all over the world" since 1975.

"I am satisfied that my son was not a military adviser," Sawyer said. "As far as I know, this is not a U.S. government plane. I satisfied myself with talking to him that he does not work for the CIA. But if in fact he is involved in this situation, I have admiration for him."

A Defense Department spokesman, however, said military records do not show that Sawyer spent time in Vietnam.

Pentagon officials also said "several hundred" William Coopers had served in the U.S. armed forces and that they could not be certain whether one of them was the dead pilot.

In Marinette, Richard C. Johnson

quoted Hasenfus as having said that "an old buddy from 20 years ago" had recruited him. "My country has called me and I'm going to go," Hasenfus reportedly said.

"I knew he was with the CIA 20 years back because he was always talking about what he'd done when he worked for them," Johnson said. Hasenfus "loved to tell" anecdotes from the years when he was a high-paid employe of Air America, the clandestine airline the CIA operated in southeast Asia during the Vietnam war, Johnson said.

President Reagan, asked yesterday whether he approved of private supply efforts for the contras, told reporters, "Well, we're in a free country where private citizens have a great many freedoms."

He later responded to questions shouted to him about the resignation of State Department spokesman Bernard Kalb and the plane. "No one on our side has been lying to anyone," he said. To the reporters who asked the questions, it was unclear which one he was answering or what "our side" meant. White House spokesman Larry Speakes said the answer referred to "both questions."

Staff writer Joe Pichirallo contributed to this report.